

Jews, Christians and Muslims set out pathways to peace in Assisi

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A breakdown of ethics, poverty and a rise in hatred and violence obstruct pathways to peace, inter-faith leaders argue



Religious leaders celebrating the 30th anniversary of St. John Paul II's Assisi interfaith peace gathering in 1986 called on people from around the world to continue its legacy to combat today's indifference and violence. **The event between 18-20 September was sponsored by the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio, the Diocese of Assisi and the Franciscan friars to reflect on the theme, "Thirst for Peace: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue."**

At the **opening assembly, attended by Italian President Sergio Mattarella**, Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople said, peace "starts from within and radiates outward, from local to global. Thus, **peace requires an interior conversion, a change in policies and behaviours,**" he said.

Humanity's relationship with creation "has a direct impact on the way in which it acts toward other people," said the patriarch, known for his decades of work on the **connection between Christian spirituality and ecology.** "Any ecological activity will be **judged by the consequences it has for the lives of the poor,**" he said. "The pollution problem is linked to that of poverty."

Recalling his visit to the Greek island of Lesbos with Pope Francis, the patriarch said they saw examples of how the **world has treated migrants "with exclusion and violence".**

Echoing Patriarch Bartholomew's sentiments, Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, said **the spirit of the 1986 Assisi meeting is still alive, despite a "complex and fragmented time with its challenges,"** particularly with **new fears arising due to war and migration.** The "simple and profound" gesture of religious leaders standing together for peace, he said, "gave witness to their respective faithful that it was possible to live together. **Dialogue is the intelligence to live together:** either we live together or together we will die," he said.

The meeting featured dozens of interreligious panel discussions on topics ranging from the environment and migration to dialogue and the media. Discussing the 30th anniversary of the 1986 peace gathering and its relevance today, **Bishop Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot**, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, said, **"The spirit of Assisi is not a vague feeling, a sentimentalism or nostalgic memory," but an example that "peace is not possible without prayer".**

"Prayer is one of the means for implementing God's design among people," he said. "It is apparent that the world cannot give peace; it is a gift from God that we must ask from him through prayers." **The religious leaders who were gathering to pray for peace, he added, are "here to show that religion is not the problem but is part of the solution to bring peace and harmony in our societies."**

"I hope that the spirit of Assisi may be deeply rooted in our hearts so that it can keep enlightening this world that is marked by the darkness of hatred and violence," he said.

Mohammad Sammak, secretary general of Lebanon's Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue, stressed the need to promote "the message of the spirit of Assisi to all nations" in order for peace to prevail, particularly between Christians and Muslims. **While differences exist** between the two faiths, he said, **"it does not mean that we have to be the enemy of one another."**

On the contrary, the **differences between religions can complement and complete each other.** "And this process of common belief and common respect is manifested in the spirit of Assisi," Sammak said.

Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka, a longtime friend of Pope Francis, also addressed the panel and lamented that violence, hate and uncertainty "has become more and more one of the characteristics of human reality". He also denounced **the "exacerbated egoism" prevalent in politics today and racist overtones by individuals** who "are holding leadership positions in well-established democratic countries."

"Uncertainty about the future to come and **no clear ethical rules respected by peoples and nations build the best scenario for the rise of demagogic and corrupted leaders,**" Skorka said.

However, despite humanity's worsening condition, he said, the **"voice calling for justice, peace and love" that emerged in 1986 "has not been silenced"**. "The spiritual fire lit then gathers us today," he said. "The hope of peace, which is the core of Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths, continues palpitating in the hearts of many," he said.

PICTURE: Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople told those gathered in Assisi that peace 'starts from within and radiates outward'

Bishop of Assisi evokes spirit of St John Paul II at start of multi-faith summit

Sean Smith, *The Tablet*, 19 September 2016

World Day for Prayer and Peace begins with Mass at the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi



The 30th anniversary of the gathering of different religions for the World Day for Prayer and Peace in Assisi "is stronger and the spirit that sustains it has spread and given encouragement to so many in the world", according to the Bishop of Assisi Mgr Domenico Sorrentino at the opening mass of the event.

Speaking at a mass celebrated at the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi which introduces the **three-day meeting organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Diocese of Assisi and the Franciscan Families**, Sorrentino told the celebrants that **St John Paul II realised the power of prayer.**

"St John Paul II," the bishop said this morning, "realised that the power of prayer needs to be used as a stimulus to build peace, hence the 'Spirit of Assisi' initiative. These prayers are addressed to God who is love and peace, they are therefore said in love and peace, as the Apostle reminds us: 'Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing'. May this be the spirit of Assisi that we have been experiencing in the past few days, at Jesus' school and of his servant Francis, in a cordial dialogue with many believers who are praying with us despite their different faiths."

President of the Community of Sant'Egidio, Marco Impagliazzo, said: "30 years on, that voice is stronger and the spirit that sustains it has spread and given encouragement to so many in the world". He also talked about **the need for "the voice of peace to be stronger and bolder as it also needs to speak for those who don't have a voice** because it has been stifled by war and violence".

Over 500 global religious leaders are expected this week for the gathering which began this morning in the Umbrian town which was the birthplace of St Francis. Tomorrow (Tuesday 20 September) Pope Francis will join the gathering where he is expected to sign a peace appeal by the leaders of all religions gathered in Assisi. He is then expected to meet

representatives from other faiths, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I.

The number of people attending this Assisi includes 500 representatives of nine religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism), 12,000 participants and more than 1,500 volunteers. There are 29 panels, 19 venues for meetings and prayers and 7 big screens relaying events across the town.

PICTURE: Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama shake hands as they met in Assisi at the inaugural World Day of Prayer for Peace in 1986

'Real peace' can be achieved as Francis arrives in Assisi and greets religious leaders

Sean Smith, *The Tablet*, 20 September 2016

Pope to take part in closing ceremony of 30th anniversary of inter-religious meeting in birthplace of his namesake



Real peace can be achieved in Assisi, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, asserted as Pope Francis arrived in the Umbrian town for the World Day for Prayer and Peace this morning (Tuesday 20 September).

Peace is possible: not peace in an abstract way, or in theory, but a peace among people who are different in belief, in faith, in culture," Paglia said in an interview with Vatican Radio. "The sign of the current time is the reality of Assisi".

He added that **the multi-faith gathering in Assisi is a great gesture towards peace in a world of conflict, difficulty, and violence:** "Difficulties can be overcome if we obey the Holy Spirit of Assisi. In the sense the presence here of the Pope and a lot of religious leaders means that their people can follow them. Their people can believe that peace and the dialogue are possible."

Paglia says that the spirit of Assisi is alive and is the lifestyle to live by. He says that "We are in this world to live in peace with each other and our differences in the sense that the spirit of Assisi is a common spirit. It is to be the spirit of the common people, is to be the spirit of leaders, and it is to be the spirit of all people who lead in their different fields.

“We hope that the prophecy of Assisi can reach the hearts of the common people and of the leaders of this world.”

The archbishop added: “I think that the pope, as a father, as a common father, will try to gather everyone. Not in order to impose his Catholic or Christian vision, but in order to push as a church to guide all people in order to become the one family created by the Holy Father.”

Pope Francis travelled by helicopter from the Vatican to the hilltop town of Assisi where he was greeted by Bishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi and other local dignitaries at the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels (pictured).

From there he travelled by car to the Holy Convent of Assisi where he was met by Father Mauro Gambetti, Custodian of the Holy Convent, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, a Muslim representative, Dr Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, the Syro-Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Efreem II, a Jewish representative and the Supreme Head of Tendai Buddhism (Japan). They then move to the Cloister of Sixtus IV where the representatives of Christian denominations and World Religions are waiting.

Over 500 global religious leaders are expected this week for the gathering which began on Monday morning in the Umbrian town which was the birthplace of St Francis. Today (20 September) **Pope Francis joined the gathering where he is due to sign a peace appeal with the leaders of all the religions gathered in Assisi.** He is then expected to meet representatives from other faiths, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I.

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Pope attacks world’s indifference to war as he prays for peace in Assisi with religious leaders and refugees

Christopher Lamb, *The Tablet*, 20 September 2016

Great sickness of our time is inertia, Francis tells gathering in front of the Basilica of St Francis



It is the “paganism” of indifference rather than religious conflict that is proving the major obstacle to bringing about world peace, Pope Francis told an interfaith prayer meeting in Assisi today.

Speaking at a gathering in the hilltop town of his namesake St Francis, the Pope said **the “great sickness of our time” was inertia where victims of war are silenced by the powerful** with the ease of switching a television channel.

The event in Assisi saw Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Zoroastrian leaders gather to pray for peace with the church leaders taking part in an ecumenical service while other religious representatives praying in nearby locations.

It was a colourful and moving occasion where Ennio Morricone’s music from The Mission film played as religious representatives from across the globe lit candles and signed a declaration dedicating themselves to building peace.

Francis stressed that the joint prayer witness in the “city of peace” showed religions were united in trying to end global conflicts - and should not be blamed for causing them.

“Our differences are not the cause of conflict and provocation, or a cold distance between us,” the Pope said in front of religious leaders during the concluding ceremony for the World Day of Peace. “We have not prayed against one another today, as has unfortunately sometimes occurred in history. **Without syncretism or relativism, we have rather prayed side-by-side and for each other.**”

Francis stressed, however, that religious leaders should free themselves of fundamentalism and hate stressing: “we never tire of repeating that **the name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone, and not war, is holy.**”

The real problem, he explained, was indifference which he described as a “**paganism**” and stops people trying to ending wars.

“It is a virus that paralyses, rendering us lethargic and insensitive, a disease that eats away at the very heart of religious fervour, giving rise to a new and deeply sad paganism,” said Francis.

“We cannot remain indifferent. Today the world has a profound thirst for peace. In many countries, people are suffering due to wars which, though often forgotten, are always the cause of suffering and poverty.”

The Pope explained that **religions had a duty to build dialogue and that leaders should be “creative mediators of peace,”** something the Pope has done in Colombia and the Central African Republic. “Our path leads us to immersing ourselves in situations and giving first place to those who suffer; to taking on conflicts and healing them from within,” he explained.

The event, **organised by the Catholic humanitarian group the Community of Sant'Egidio, marks 30 years since John Paul II gathered 160 religious leaders to pray for peace**, an event which has gone down as one of the remarkable acts of his papacy.

Today, the leader of the Sant'Egidio community, Andrea Riccardi, described war as the “mother of poverty” citing Syria in particular: his community has helped give asylum to those left homeless by the country’s civil war and arranged for the Pope to rescue twelve Syrian refugees from the Greek Island of Lesbos.

Francis travelled to Assisi by helicopter this morning and was welcomed by religious leaders including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni and Dr Abbas Shouman, the deputy president of Egypt’s Al-Azhar university.

Francis had lunch with the leaders along with 12 refugees who had been victims of war including three Syrians who had fled the city of Aleppo, Palestinians, Eritreans and a Nigerian. During the prayer service in Assisi’s lower basilica, the Pope said that such victims were calling for peace but too often their appeal fell on deaf ears.

“Our brothers and sisters, who live under the threat of bombs and are forced to leave their homes into the unknown, stripped of everything, plead for peace,” he said.

“But they are frequently given, like Jesus, the bitter vinegar of rejection. **Who listens to them? Who bothers responding to them? Far too often they encounter the deafening silence of indifference**, the selfishness of those annoyed at being pestered, the coldness of those who silence their cry for help with the same ease with which television channels are changed.”

The service also heard from **Archbishop Welby who stressed that the world had become deceived by an “imaginary economy”** where the true riches of God’s mercy were disguised. The archbishop said that despite spending money Europe had built only “sandy foundations” which had led to family breakdown, inequality and rise of extremism. **“Riddled with fear, resentment and anger, we seek ever more desperately, fearing the stranger, not knowing where to find courage,”** the archbishop said.

At the end of the day **the Pope called on world leaders to look beyond “particular interests” to end conflicts and “not remain deaf to God’s appeal to their consciences.”**

At the end of the day **the leaders of different religions stood together and prayed silently before they signed a declaration of peace which was handed to children from different parts of the world.**